

# Music

## Herbie Hancock rocks London

He's one of the most influential jazz musicians in history, and at 70 he keeps on producing. **Mike Flynn** hunts down Herbie Hancock for a chat about eternal life, the global family and his Grammy-winning new album

Piano legend Herbie Hancock – of Blue Note, Miles Davis's band, electro-funk anthems and Grammy winning fame – turned 70 in April this year but shows absolutely no sign of slowing down. Aside from looking 20 years younger, he scooped the top Grammy Award for Album of the Year for his sublime 2007 set *River: The Joni Letters* (beating Kanye West, Foo Fighters and Amy Winehouse, no less) and his latest album is even more ambitious. 'The Imagine Project' jettisons stylistic boundaries to embrace rock, soul, jazz, funk and world sounds from an A-list cast of global superstars that includes Pink, Seal, John Legend, Jeff Beck, India Arie, Konono No 1, The Chieftains, Tinariwen, Chaka Khan, Anoushka Shankar and Wayne Shorter. Linked together by Hancock's luminous piano and keyboard playing, his ambition for the record is nothing short of world peace through musical collaboration.

**'I notice people retire and the next thing, they're dead!'**

**Were there any tricky elements to producing such a large-scale collaborative project?**

'I should tell you it took a year and a half to make this record, it took a long time and it's primarily because so many of the artists have their own careers. It's like an A-list of celebrities; they're on tour, or they are working on their own record or some other project. The same thing applies not only to the Western artists but the artists from Brazil, Canada and India and so on. It went surprisingly smoothly until towards the end, when we ran into all kinds of obstacles. Some artists pulled out and they wouldn't give their approval of their performances, they thought their performance was poor, so in some cases I had to find a major artist who would be a substitute.'



**Hancock's half-century** Herbie celebrates 50 years since taking flight with Byrd

**You've always loved and used technology but what's your take on the way technology has taken over our lives today?**

'Well, there's the good news and the bad news: the good news is that it is a new paradigm that offers a way for the world to get smaller, for people to be able to communicate from anywhere on the planet as though you are next door, or pretty much in the same room.'

'And people are taking advantage of all these possibilities with some of these social networking devices like Twitter and Facebook, so it opens up these possibilities for a harmonious kind of globalisation, certainly on the internet.'

'At the same time, technology also makes it possible for us to survive with minimal contact with anyone outside our room! [Laughs] You can order food, clothes, entertainment... Today you can

see a lot of young people sitting in the same room and rather than talking among themselves, they'll be texting each other... sitting right across the table from each other. Which is interesting but also very sad. But we can expect that, especially with an advancement for the greater good, there will always be obstacles.'

'I practise Buddhism and we talk about that – Nichiren Daishonin, the founder of the Buddhism I practise, said that; he said when you are trying to do something for the greater good there will be obstacles that point towards the fact that you are actually on the right track! Because we need obstacles in order to grow. As they say, 'No pain no gain,' you know with exercise, it applies to life too. If we had a life with no obstacles we'd probably commit suicide, from boredom. We need to

constantly win over ourselves, then win over our lesser self, because there is our greater self, and that battle is a constant battle and that battle is a part of life.'

**You're still pushing yourself creatively in the live arena.**

'Well, you know that goes back to lessons I learned from Miles Davis. Miles taught us to challenge ourselves, and I've never forgotten those lessons. And the more you challenge yourself, the more confidence you develop. And the more you look forward to the next challenge. It's challenges that make life interesting, it's challenges that really keep us alive. I notice that people retire and the next thing you know they're dead! When all of a sudden they have nothing to do, their life goes. As long as you have something to do, as long as you find something vital then it manifests itself in your own vitality. I think it's important to always be a student of life.'

**There's a nice quote that says: 'There is no way to happiness: happiness is the way.'**

'That's really important – a lot of people live in a world of delusion that they think their happiness is going to be found lying down on a beach on some tropical island, after their work, and that's a very shallow kind of happiness and very fleeting. The only happiness that you can find that can be solid and eternal has to come from within your life. It's building a solid foundation within your life that's a support for your outlook on the world – throughout the rest of your life and through your eternal life – and we [Buddhists] believe in eternal life. That death is another state of life; it's an innate state of life, but with the potential for life again still there. It's an amazing way to look at life. We also have a practice that we do every day. We chant a sound, which we believe is the sound of life itself... it's like the name of life. Your life recognises that sound and responds to it and it makes the deepest part of your life, your enlightened life, get stronger and begin to emerge. You get glimpses of it as you practise; it's a pretty amazing way to live your life. The ultimate goal is your own happiness but we also practise for the happiness of others, so it's a very passionate viewpoint that's not selfish – it's not about "me" it's more about the "we".'

*'The Imagine Project' is out now on Sony Classical. Herbie Hancock plays the Royal Festival Hall on Nov 13 as part of the London Jazz Festival.*

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